

Remarks on Cuba Base

By Chalmers M. Roberts
Washington Post Staff Writer

Almost lost in the Middle East crises was last Friday's seeming one-day wonder: a tough American warning to the Soviet Union about the possible construction by the Russians of a strategic base in Cuba.

Yet the Cuban affair does bear a close relationship to the Middle East, specifically to Moscow's role there, and to such other Soviet-American points of interest as Berlin and the strategic arms limitation talks (SALT).

The timing involved in what was said last Thursday is of more than passing interest. Hints of the possibility that the Soviets planned to build a naval base at Cienfuegos on Cuba's south shore first appeared in print as far back as several weeks. The Economist of London, for instance, ran such a report in its Sept. 19 issue.

Pentagon reporters began asking for information. A column Friday morning in the New York Times by C. L. Sulzberger, stating that reports of a base under construction were being investigated, added to the pressure. The Pentagon then told newsmen that three Soviet ships had moved three heavy barges and other equipment into Cienfuegos harbor in the past few weeks.

This, said spokesman Jerry W. Friedheim, "makes us feel that they may be seeking sustained capabilities in the area." He added that the Pentagon was "not sure that they are building a submarine port facility."

a briefing in the White House
Such statements, on top of Pentagon reports of Soviet fleet activities of late in the Atlantic and Caribbean areas, would be enough to worry military hawks in Washington but hardly enough to do more than bolster Navy claims for more money from Congress.

U.S. Suddenly Alarmed

Yet at 3:20 that Friday aft-

ernoon, during the course of a briefing in the White House East Room on President Nixon's then impending European trip, the Cuban base issue was drastically escalated.

It should be said here that up to that hour no general alarm bells had been rung within the Nixon administration, according to several specialists whose duty is to follow such matters. Indeed, the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs still claims it knows nothing about Cienfuegos since that is the responsibility of officials handling Soviet affairs.

Yet when the White House briefer, who may not be named but who this time was allowed to be directly quoted to add emphasis, was asked about the reports, he had in hand a statement made by President Kennedy at the close of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.

As has been reported, the White House official, as he may be designated, stated

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that "the Soviet Union can be under no doubt that we would view the establishment of a strategic base in the Caribbean with the utmost seriousness."

He called attention to the Kennedy statement that there would be peace in the Caribbean "if all offensive weapons are removed from Cuba and kept out of the hemisphere in the future."

That, he added, of course remains the policy of this government. He avoided answering questions as to what was going on at Cienfuegos but he did say that "obviously, a Polaris-type submarine is an offensive weapon." The Soviets are building a fleet of such subs.

Watchful for Now

Finally, when pressed, the White House spokesman

Reflect Worry

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About Soviets

said:

"Let's be careful about what has been said. We are watching the events in Cuba. We are not at this moment in a position to say exactly what they mean. We will continue to observe them and at the right moment we will take the action that seems indicated."

That latter phrase, coupled with the "utmost seriousness" reference earlier, constituted a startling escalation of verbiage. It amounted to an American threat to forcibly prevent the use of Cienfuegos as a Soviet base for missile submarines, a threat of a nature not uttered by Washington to Moscow since the Cuban crisis eight years ago.

In retrospect, there are two lines of explanation now heard in Washington.

One is political. The White House appears to have begun to fear the rise of a Democratic Kenneth Keating, it is said. This is a reference to the former Republican senator from New York, now the U.S. ambassador to India, who in 1962 annoyed and embarrassed the Kennedy administration with repeated statements

that the Soviet Union was emplacing missiles in Cuba, long before the President confirmed that act. Of course, 1962, like 1970, was a congressional election year.

The other explanation is more substantive and a clue to it can be found in other remarks by that same White House spokesman last Friday afternoon.

He said in response to a question: "We do hope and we have made it clear to the Soviet Union in many exchanges, and we have done so in the SALT negotiations, we do hope that the two superpowers recognize their special responsibility for tactical advantages for the benefit of the greater interest of humanity in peace."

Arms Race Pressure?

In short, Cienfuegos could be a case of Moscow pressing Washington for tactical advantage in the arms race. The spokesman did not say so but he might well have

added: just as they have done in cheating on the stand-still cease-fire in Egypt.

On Sept. 16 in Chicago the same spokesman had expressed puzzlement at that cheating and raised the question of whether it meant the Soviet Union was moving generally to a hard-line policy all across the board.

Thus as of now the general conclusion in Washington is that the surprising escalation of White House language over what is going on at Cienfuegos was less a function of that particular item than a reflection of a growing administration concern over Soviet policy in general.

As to Cienfuegos itself, military experts generally scoff at a comparison to the Cuban crisis of 1962. For one thing no missiles are being land-based. Submarine use of that port would ease Soviet crew and other problems and probably permit more ships to remain on station in the Atlantic. But it also would aid U.S. Navy tracking of such submarines, possibly a point of balancing value.

Soviet Union Scoffs At Reports on Cuba

By Harry Trimborn
Los Angeles Times

MOSCOW, Sept. 30—The Soviet Union today scoffed

at reports it may be building a submarine base in Cuba, calling them a Nixon administration propaganda ploy to secure votes in the November election.

The official Communist Party newspaper Pravda declared that such reports were part of an effort to "treacherously fan the military psychosis (in the United States) with the aid of hastily concocted inventions."

It was, said Pravda, a new "get tough" propaganda campaign mounted by the administration to cover the bankruptcy of its own policies by raising "another racket of another single quote 'soviet threat' in

Cuba, the Middle East and elsewhere.

The comments were the first Soviet public reaction to last week's reports from Washington of intelligence "indications" that a base capable of housing nuclear missile submarines was being built at Cienfuegos on the southern coast of Cuba.

Pravda did not mention specifically the reported submarine base construction. It referred only to reported Soviet "military movement" in Cuba and elsewhere. But there was little doubt that it had the reported base in mind.

"It is clear," said Pravda, "... that the racket about preparations in Cuba sup-

posedly threatening the United States' security has been raised for perfectly definite purposes."

These purposes, said the newspaper, are aimed at creating "a favorable atmosphere for the elections to Congress and the United States President's visit to Europe."

The Soviet press has been attacking Mr. Nixon's journey as a "saber-rattling" demonstration of American military might.

The Pravda article linked this to what it charged was a Nixon administration effort to "create an atmosphere of military hysteria among ordinary Americans

and exerting political pressure upon the capitals of some other capitalistic countries."

Pravda viewed this effort as an attempt to revive "the bad old times" of the cold war of the 1950s.

By reviving old anti-soviet antagonisms, the Nixon administration hopes to gather votes among the nation's "silent majority, that is, from the right wing section of the electorate," Pravda said, adding:

There are also other reasons—"the forthcoming voting for military appropriations in Congress which proceed most successfully with the fair wind of the cold war."